A "American Lake Scene," 1844
by Thomas Cole

B "The American Wilderness," 1864
by Asher B. Durand

C "Lake George"
by George F. Kensett

WILDERNESS

A Detroit Institute of Arts

B Cincinnati Art Museum

C Metropolitan Museum of Art

The paintings shown in this part of the exhibit portray the beautiful, awesomely empty, and unnervingly quiet landscape that confronted the first explorers and settlers. In 1776, the same year that the Declaration was signed, Daniel Boone rescued a daughter from Indian captivity and the first marriage in Kentucky was performed. A great primaeval forest began just west of Philadelphia and extended, with hardly a break, to the Mississippi River. It was said that a squirrel could have travelled the whole distance without ever touching the ground. The trees were so high and grew so thick that in places the sun never penetrated, and the first dwellers acquired a peculiar pallor: "They are tall and pale," wrote one early observer on the frontier, "like vegetables that grow in a vault, pining for light." Most of this forest, incredibly, was cut down by the Civil War, transforming a trackless wilderness into an agricultural paradise.

Beyond the Mississippi lay the uncharted prairies, the mountains, and the arid wastes that seemed to deserve the name which the 19th Century pioneers gave it — "the Great American Desert." (If you think that name is inappropriate, just consider the thousand-mile expanse of brown, from the sand hills of Nebraska to the High Sierras, that you can view out of the window of a transcontinental jet.)

Little of that original wilderness can be found today: the uncut woodlands of northern Maine, a few acres of virgin white pine in Pennsylvania, the rhododendron-clogged vastnesses of the Great Smokies, some remote and untampered with stretches of desert in Nevada and Arizona, the Olympic Range in Washington. The list gets shorter all the time. But it is a landscape that will long remain in our consciousness, for it is the landscape that shaped the American character.

D "The Mohawk Valley," 1866
by Alexander H. Wyant

D Metropolitan Museum of Art